

Untitled continuation of Progression

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Summary: The opening chapter to the story to follow Progression Volumes 1 and 2, A Continuation of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, which I also authored and self-published. Description will be updated as this story develops.

1. Chapter 1

****Disclaimer:** You will really need to have read Progression volumes 1 and 2 before reading this, otherwise you'll be a bit confused.

Chapter 1

"Uncle?"

"Come in, Darcy," said Lord Matlock. "Shut the door."

Fitzwilliam Darcy obeyed his uncle, as obedience seemed to be the only service he could offer in this dire week following the Almack's ball, the week he was meant to journey home to Pemberley with his wife and sister to happily await the birth of his first child, but instead was still fixed to London as a guest in the Matlock townhome, and preparing for the worst.

Lord Ashbourne was dying. Though even doctors had yet to admit as much, the reality was undeniable as the Earl of Matlock's eldest son and heir writhed with every breath, his condition having grown steadily worse for weeks, his stupid pride refusing a doctor's visit until the morning he woke up feeling as though a crushing weight were pressing upon his chest. Dr. Fletcher's immediate arrival and subsequent treatments of the viscount's pneumonia managed to bring Stephen out of imminent death to his current level of perpetual discomfort; but his overall state remained critical with little sign of improvement.

After shutting the door, Darcy took a few steps toward Lord Matlock,

who sat in an armchair, holding in his hands what Darcy soon realized was a sealed letter. He watched his uncle's weary eyes staring at the square bit of folded parchment as though analyzing it.

"This is not Richard's hand," Matlock said vaguely.

"What do you mean, Uncle?"

"See for yourself." Lord Matlock handed Darcy the letter.

Upon seeing the name of "Capt. Richard Fitzwilliam," Darcy breathed a heavy sigh of equal parts relief and dread, understanding in that moment what his uncle meant.

"No, it is not," Darcy confirmed. "Some other addressed it. But the letter is from Richard, nonethelessâ€|which means he is alive."

"But not well," replied Lord Matlock in a cracked voice. "Alive, but not well, Nephew, if unfit to write his own letters."

Darcy had never a talent for comforting others in emotional torment, and a repulsion to seeing it in men. The year before, he had wondered at Charles Bingley's transparent melancholy after Bingley was finally convinced of Jane Bennet's indifference towards him, wrong as Darcy was for interfering. He had loathed himself for responding similarly in the months following Elizabeth's rejection of him in Hunsford; for he was taught by his father, who'd watched Lady Anne Darcy slowly succumb over a number of years, that to be temporarily weakened by love was excusable, but to be crippled by it, damnable. One must carry on for the sake of all; and when a man begins to break, he must be sternly reminded of his duties. Soon after George Darcy's rather sudden death, young William consciously channeled his pain elsewhere; for the family estates would not manage themselves, nor would his eleven-year-old sister. Much like his father, in the presence of pain he could not mend, whether of the flesh or heart, Darcy felt helpless and feeble; therefore, he often denied it, refused to express it, and, in general, ducked from it whenever possible.

Such vulnerability Darcy had never before seen in his normally rock-solid uncle, though understood well enough under the circumstances. Nevertheless, Darcy could take no more, and in a bold act of impropriety, angrily tore open the seal. He gave himself no time to react to what was written before handing the letter off to Lord Matlock, who had kept to his chair in silent suspense before reading the single, scrawled statement.

"Oh, God!" Matlock dropped his hand which held the letter and moaned wretchedly. "Richard, my boyâ€|"

"Shall I tell Her Ladyship, Uncle?" The earl's display was too much to bear. Darcy was adamantly determined to turn anguish into action.

"Yesâ€|yes, tell everyone!" Matlock sprang from his chair. "I must write back immediatelyâ€|_no!_ He is encamped at Brighton. I shall fetch him myself!"

"Take a moment, please, My Lord!" Much as it pained him, Darcy had to make his impassioned uncle see the flaw in this plan, and stood in the man's path. "With Stephen's condition soâ€|_uncertain_â€|even a

day's journey may be too extensiveâ€”"

"_Extensive?_ You are saying Stephen could be dead by nightfall, Darcy? You are saying I should send a _servant_ to bring back my boy, who may be equally infirmed?"

"Not equally." Darcy referred to the letter still clutched in Matlock's hand. "You see here, he says he is well, whereas Stephenâ€”I am saying it is not worth the risk." What he saw in Matlock's eyes drove Darcy to add without thinking, "Let me go to Brighton, Uncle. I shall bring him home. First thing in the morning, I promise you."

Matlock calmed considerably after this promise was made. "Yes. You go, Nephew. I must stay here with Stephen in caseâ€”" The earl brought his hand to Darcy's shoulder and squeezed gently, the blue in his eyes fogged over with redness and fatigue. "May you never know this feeling, Darcy."

Before Darcy could respond, Matlock turned from him and crossed the room to his desk. "Go and tell the family, Darcyâ€”about Richard. I shall be along shortly."

Darcy bowed. "Yes, Uncle."

* * *

><p>Elizabeth Darcy lay in bed that evening, waiting for William to finally retire. It had been a long, arduous day, just as the past five others had been since learning of poor Lord Ashbourne's declining health. Her time was spent mostly apart from her husband, and in the company of Lady Matlock, who apparently drew some amount of comfort from Elizabeth's presence in the home. Dear Georgiana kept mostly to the music room, having confessed to Elizabeth she found the waiting all but unbearable, that she would give anything to relieve the feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. Elizabeth thought of the letter from Lord Russell, intended for Georgiana, but still in Darcy's protective custody. William was reminded that the kind-eyed gentleman's letter almost certainly contained words of praise, not intention, and that it should serve a purpose in soothing Georgie's angst; but still he remained hesitantâ€”and vexingly stubborn. Lord Russell (or John, as he preferred), was the younger brother of the roguish Marquess Thornhaugh, a man with whom Darcy wanted, and understandably so, all connection severed after an evening too long in the man's presence. Caroline Bingley was still far from recovery as a consequence to her involvement with her former suitor now bound for India, a land told rich with prospects. The unjust outcome had Thornhaugh set sail to make his fortune as the woman he spurned now resides far from London Society with Mr. and Mrs. Bingley, her virtue corrupted and her mind all but lost.

Equally unjust, Elizabeth figured, was to mark Lord Russell for blood connection to such a man, however differently her husband saw it. Georgiana was still wholly ignorant of John's letter, and should likely welcome it with the wish to maintain a friendship with the amiable bachelor, thus her brother's apprehension. Fortunately came the news of Richard's correspondence and forthcoming return from war, which put everyone in a better frame of mind, but John's letter ever lingered in Elizabeth's thoughts.

As Stephen's condition worsened, Lady Ashbourne had kept her husband's family at bay, requesting that, for the sake of his health and her own fragile nerves, they visit individually throughout the day, and for a short period of time. As the couple lived but a few blocks away, the family respected her boundaries, and her wishes, whilst left to live in fear all day that at any moment the letter may come with the assertion that the end was near, and that respects were now to be paid.

The youngest and ever optimistic Fitzwilliam sibling, Matthew, believed knowledge was the key to restoring his older brother as he studied at length in his family's library.

"I agree with Fletcher," said Matthew one day after Elizabeth inquired about a particular medical book he was perusing. "'Tis absurd to think the rain that evening played a part in Stephen's illness. Your husband, too, was drenched while seeing him home, was he not? And he is healthy as a horse!"

"My sister once caught a cold whilst riding horseback in the rain," replied Elizabeth. "She was ill for days."

Matthew kept his eyes to his book when he answered, "She likely was ill already, and caught a chill, which exacerbated it."

"But how?"

"That is the question, Cousin," replied Matthew. "The answer to that question means a cure is not far behind. In the meantime, doctors shall keep to these labor-intensive treatments devised by imbeciles from centuries before. These books are older than Hippocrates himself, and tell us nothing!"

In frustration, Matthew slammed the book closed and tossed it aside. "I could be wrong, but I simply cannot comprehend how applying leeches to the skin helps to cure anyone. Three days of this, and Stephen cannot take a breath without pain. At present, it seems the only possible remedy for this is fortitude, something my brother has sadly never held in abundance."

Elizabeth felt a tremendous amount of sympathy for anyone ailing as Stephen was, despite her off-putting introduction to the viscount in Derbyshire a mere two weeks into her marriage. He was disapproving to say the least, as was Lady Ashbourne, whose learned behavior of abject snobbery had eased a bit in the wake of her husband's illness, replaced with envy over the Almack's ball she was obliged to give up and the Town talk of the Darcys' infamous waltz deemed highly impertinent towards all of Society present. The topic was once discussed at length during an afternoon visit, according to an exasperated Lady Matlock. Much as she had argued that only the Patronesses were truly affronted, resulting in Mr. and Mrs. Darcy's subsequent ban from the venue, and that popular opinion on "the Darcy waltz" was decidedly mixed, Lady Ashbourne maintained her position of the Darcys as public pariahs; and Her Ladyship was simply too weary to further pursue the matter, particularly as her son lay suffering in a sickbed just above them.

Elizabeth had forgiven Lord Ashbourne long ago for his unkindness towards her as she came to learn more about the man, how he was spoiled silly as a child, reminded often of his supreme significance,

and almost never disciplined. Over any defects in his character was a colossal mistake in his upbringing which made him what he was, Lady Matlock insisted, and the countess lay far more blame on herself for the end result. Elizabeth came to realize, as well, that Stephen was not especially liked in Town, having had few visitors throughout his quarantine with the exception of doctors and family, who, through no fault of their own, were awkwardly ill-equipped in these matters. Also plainly evident was that Lady Ashbourne felt no love for her husband, indeed felt more disrupted than distressed by his indisposition, as Dr. Fletcher brought colleagues in and out of the home to examine the viscount and theorize on other methods of treatment. Among those treatments were teas made from milkweed, ginger, even garlic, but Stephen, as Matthew had said, lacked a certain resilience no medicine could cure. Meanwhile, Lord Matlock kept to his solitude; and Lady Matlock was mostly quiet and pensive. Matthew studied feverishly. Georgiana played continuously. Anne DeBourgh, finding the London air far more refreshing than William, spent a lot of time out of doors, and would join Elizabeth on long walks in Hyde Park in the early morning hours. Darcy was restless, always asking for an occupation. And Lord Ashbourne spent far more time with physicians than family. The whole awful business with Stephen seemed as cold as the man himself was towards Elizabeth that evening they met; and she was convinced the poor man was far more deserving of compassion and comforting than anyone could seem to offer.

“He wants none from me, of course,” Elizabeth thought, “but from someone—”

Her thoughts were interrupted by a pair of strong arms encircling her from behind.

“Am I horrible?” Elizabeth heard Darcy ask over her shoulder as his hand grasped her ever expanding middle.

“Yes,” she answered with a chuckle. “Why do you ask, sir?”

“Despite my cousin's illness, despite Richard's letter, the distress of my family, despite the promise I made to my uncle—all I can think about is Pemberley, and how much I wish to take you and Georgiana home.”

Elizabeth turned to face her husband. “You are not horrible.”

“But I am selfish.”

She smiled. “Yes. However, your next journey is to Brighton, my love—not Pemberley. And speaking of letters—”

Darcy sighed. “I have decided. I shall give it to her tomorrow morning, just before I leave. Already I have waited too long.”

“Will she be cross, do you think?”

“At first. But I will explain.”

“And should a friendship form between them? Or something more, I daresay?”

“A harsh lesson your husband must learn to accept, my dear, is that

some things must be dealt with as they come. Whatever lies in the contents of that letter, I believe Georgiana is deserving of it, and that I should be wrong to suppress it. What happens next, I cannot possibly know, nor shall I venture to guess."

"But you will wonder," she replied, nestling closer. Darcy acknowledged her final word with a small grunt, and changed the subject with a gentle press to her tummy.

"Have you given any thought to a name?" He asked.

"My thoughts are a bit occupied with cravings for sweets, especially cakes and Cook's strawberry tarts."

He laughed with her before planting a kiss to her forehead. "My dear, dear wife. I do not want to leave you, not even for a day."

"Shall I come with you?"

Darcy pondered the question seriously a few moments before answering, "No. I think my aunt may need you more than I at present."

"I think Stephen needs a friend," said Elizabeth out of context. She watched her husband consider how to answer.

"We are notâ€|my family has never beenâ€|_demonstrative_. Matthew is an exception, but he is fully immersed in finding a solution, rather than in nursing him as you did Jane at Netherfield." Darcy smiled wanly at the memory. "We have not your talents, my dear."

"Is it a talent to sit by an ailing man's side and read to him?"

"My cousin does not wish to be read to, I assure you. Other than doctors, he asks for no one and speaks only in commands. He is angered and embittered by what is happening to him, and in true form, blames others. He will not die in peace."

"You truly believe Lord Ashbourne will die?"

Darcy nodded. "It will not be long. I only hope I can bring back Richard in time."

In a sudden burst of emotion, Elizabeth took her husband's face in her hands. "Hear this, my love. Wherever you are, whatever you do, you must take extremely good care of yourself; for whatever happens to you, happens to me. Do you understand?"

Though Darcy kissed her reassuringly, Elizabeth held onto him tightly, still wondering if he truly understood.

Chapter 2

Captain Richard Fitzwilliam was weary of the stink of death. By order, he was to remain at Brighton's Auxiliary Hospital and comfort the men far worse off than he, men who had survived the voyage home, but whose wounds had turned gangrenous and their fevers deadly. Over the last several days, Richard had held many a hand of many a dying soldier, never quite becoming accustomed to how young so many of them were. How the bloody hell a fourteen-year-old boy ended up in battle Fitzwilliam could hardly begin to fathom; yet he held the lad's hand

and talked to him as he slowly perished from what the nurses believed was Typhus. Richard kept his resilience as the youth cried for his mother in the end, but was uncertain he could witness another brother in arms succumbing to infection or disease.

Fitzwilliam himself with his injured and immobile right shoulder (substantial tissue damage, he was told), was physically incapacitated to a state of uselessness in battle without the distress of illness or broken bones. Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, one of the bravest men who'd ever lived, had lost his own right arm completely after combat off the coast of Africa, yet lived to battle another ten years before a marksman's shot finally brought the man down in Trafalgar. Fitzwilliam's arm was at least still intact, and should heal completely over the course of several months if he takes care. In the meantime, Richard was determined to strengthen the left arm, eat with it, write with it, and fight with it.

When not attending his comrades, he had practiced wielding his sword in that hand, striking tall grass and branches, but found himself terribly limited by the heaviness of the steel. Thus far, he could not even properly grip the blasted thing as he found himself flailing like a blind man attacking spirits in the dark.

One afternoon as he awkwardly swung at a stone set on a tree stump he heard a voice that immediately turned his head.

"You must work your way up to steel, you caper wit! Or do you wish to render the left arm as ineffective as the right?"

Fitzwilliam could not have been more thrilled to hear Darcy's voice as he saw the man approaching him with a wry grin.

2. Chapter 2

"Patience was never my strong suit, Cousin," said Richard, putting down the sword. "But I do take your point."

Despite their respective feelings of warmth and gratitude at being reunited, the two men greeted one another properly and with no deluge of emotion. Darcy took a moment to examine Richard's right arm tightly adhered to his side. "Well, that is the scrawled note explained."

As they walked together, Fitzwilliam described how the injury occurred, all the while noting Lord Matlock's absence among others in his family he'd have thought might have accompanied Darcy, and began wondering with mounting anxiety where he was to begin his recovery.

"I have not yet been cleared to take leave of this camp," said Richard, figuring he may rather stay with his red-coated brethren than face his estranged father clearly indifferent to what he may have suffered in battle. "And frankly, Darcy, I should rather remain where I am needed, though you cannot know how thankful I am for your coming here in response to my letter. Apparently the old manâ€"

"You are cleared, Captain," Darcy interrupted. "I have already met with your superiors and explained the circumstances which demand you

take leave at once. You are to report to them for a quick meeting, then come along with me directly. As of this moment, your service is at an end." Alarmed by Darcy's severe manner, Richard began to ask questions, but was quickly cut off with, "I shall explain everything on the way. Do hurry, Cousin. I fear we haven't much time."

Richard settled his business as quickly as possible, becoming more unnerved when Major Bradley shook his hand, offered condolences for the unfortunate turn of events, and wished his family well. Darcy awaited his return alongside the Matlock family coach, which was already packed with Fitzwilliam's few belongings, though he kept the leather satchel given by youngest brother Matthew at his side as always. As the carriage set off, Darcy wasted no time in explaining the reason for their hasty departure and journey back to London, after which Fitzwilliam took a few minutes to allow the jarring bit of information about his ailing brother sink in before responding. With a slight shake of his head, he said, "Trust Stephen to contract The Winter Fever in mid-summer."

Darcy glared at him. "I shall attribute your flippant reaction to shock and denial, which I can perfectly understand," he said. "However, I assure you Stephen's condition is severe beyondâ€"

"_I_ suffered the same affliction, Darcy, when I was but twelve! Do you not remember?" Darcy acknowledged as much. "Entirely bed-ridden for three weeks, wishing I were dead, and certain death would come!"

"You _did not_, and _were not_," Darcy firmly corrected. "I beg your pardon, Cousin, but you fought with every breath to live through that ordeal, drank every foul-tasting brew given to you by that nanny of yours, Mrs. Barnaby. You were most determinedâ€"never resigned. I was there, and I often compare your experience then to your brother's now. Stephen simply has not your perseverance, and nowhere near your physical constitution."

Richard _had_ thought it rather miraculous he'd not developed the same deadly afflictions as his fallen comrades, especially given his close proximity to all of them. Pure luck, he had figured. Nothing more.

"And how is everyone managing?" Richard quickly modified his question. "How is Papa managing?"

"Not well," answered Darcy. "Even less so when he was uncertain of _your_ whereabouts than today when he knows I am to bring you home, which was my idea. I had to almost physically restrain the man from coming for you himself."

"Sincerely?"

"Yes, you bloody idiot," said Darcy with a swift kick to Richard's war-torn boot. "You must make peace with that man, especially nowâ€|" Darcy softened his tone. "Especially now that you stand to become the viscount."

Richard then delivered a kick to his cousin's pristine and polished boot. "Bloody bite your tongue, Darcy! My brother is not about to succumb to _this_ of all things."

Silence filled the carriage for the remainder of the journey as Richard pondered seriously the notion of becoming next in line to inherit the earldom, which, in actuality, he did not want, and had never wanted. Before this news, he had never contemplated the possibility that some incident may befall his older brother, thus placing Richard in such a position. Despite his often petulant remarks about Stephen as an overindulged prig and he the supplemental sibling, Richard had always submitted to his second-born status, a thankless though relatively unshackled existence, and had lived his life accordingly. He was hardly prepared to consider altering everything to fit a noble rank which would demand more from him than he was currently willing to give. Before Darcy's burdensome report, Richard had determined his immediate future was in mending his torn shoulder whilst training extensively as Lieutenant-Colonel Porter had commanded, so that he could go to battle once more as the soldier he was. No, he was positively not meant to be an earl, to belong to the House of Lords, to preside on behalf of The Throne over the county of Derbyshire. Of that, Fitzwilliam was certain; therefore, by the reaching of London he was quite convinced that Stephen would ultimately pull through, and that Darcy was incorrect in his assessment.

By late evening, the carriage pulled up not to Matlock House on Park Lane as Richard had expected, but a few blocks east to Cottingham Manor, the seasonal residence of Lord and Lady Ashbourne. In terms of wealth and connections, Stephen had married exceedingly well, his wife the sole surviving child of the Earl of Cottingham, whose townhome was slightly larger than Matlock House, and therefore the couple's abode of choice. Their three years together produced no children, however, thus solidifying Richard's lawful place as the future earl should Stephen truly be at death's door this very moment. Richard again shuddered at the thought, noting with distress his own family's chaise parked outside the home, instantly realizing that the situation just might be more serious than he was yet willing to accept.

Stephen is certainly ill, terribly ill, his mind granted him. But not dying. I'll not allow that.

"I was not expecting Aunt and Uncle to be present, as well," said Darcy uneasily as they exited the coach. "This cannot be good."

"Cheese it, Darcy," Richard grumbled. He marched up the path to the front door. To the astonishment of the two men, the door was opened not by a footman or Jacobs, the butler, but by Lord Matlock himself, as though he'd been waiting at the threshold all afternoon.

Richard stood still and waited patiently as his father looked him up and down, silently scrutinizing his level of health and physical damage, but giving no indication of approval or disapproval with what he saw. Father and son then stared at one another for what seemed a lifetime before Matlock said to him in a voice devoid of sentiment, "Say goodbye to your brother, Richard."

In that moment, Fitzwilliam wanted nothing more than to un-swath his arm and land a facer to the old man, but instead quietly brushed past the earl and entered the home, which was eerily quiet, and no servants in sight. To his surprise, a relation he'd not seen in over a year appeared from another room, and greeted him in her usual, shy

manner.

"Anne?" Richard said before making sure to bow. "You've just arrived, as well?"

Matlock explained that Anne had been staying with the family these last several weeks. That meant Lady Catherine could not be too far away, Fitzwilliam estimated, though as yet nowhere about. Before he could inquire about it, however, Georgiana seemed to come out of nowhere and put her arms around him carefully, minding his injury.

"Richard! Thank God you've come home!"

"There, there, dearest." Richard allowed Georgie's embrace, for he could tell she'd been weeping for some time, but could only look up the opulent staircase which led to Stephen's chambers. "Is he dead?"

"No," said Matthew as he approached from the foyer, dejected and weary. He reached out and laid an affectionate hand to the back of Richard's neck. "Welcome home, Brother."

This is bad, terribly bad, thought Fitzwilliam. Matthew had clearly surrendered, and was letting him know with his eyes that the end of their brother's life was near. Richard could feel the gravity of the situation bearing down harder upon his shoulders. He found it difficult to breathe. Could Stephen _truly_ be on his deathbed? _It is not possible!_

"Whatâ€"what am I to do?" Richard stammered, his heart pounding. Even in battle he'd not felt this much dread.

"Dr. Fletcher is explaining things now to Lady Ashbourne and Mama," said Matthew. "It would be a good time for you to see him now, Brother, though he is very short of breath, heavily dosed with laudanum, and likely will not try and speak."

Richard nodded slightly, but could not take his eyes from the stairwell. He felt a gentle press on his shoulder, and turned his head to see Darcy's sympathetic eyes. "I will accompany you if you wish," he said.

Fitzwilliam shook himself from his momentary stupor and started up the stairs. "I shall go alone."

Despite everyone's grave demeanor, part of him was still persuaded that everything would turn out favorably, that Stephen was overall in better shape than was estimated. Their word was simply not enough. He had to see and assess for himself, _by_ himself, his brother's health as he had the many young soldiers who had surrendered to death under the very _worst_ of conditions, not in the bloody lap of luxury, under the care and supervision of London's top physicians, and in a comfortably spacious sick room. He vividly recalled his own misery whilst suffering pneumonia as a child, how it hurt to breathe, the nonstop coughing, the exhaustion, the gobs of mucus, the burning feverâ€"not to mention the bloodletting which Richard himself put a stop to with a blow to Fletcher's bread basket in one angry fit. The family doctor could have had the boy held down after that and forced to accept the treatment; but Dr. Fletcher surprisingly relented

without explanation.

Slowly, Richard opened the door to Stephen's bed chamber faintly aglow with candlelight. Though the room seemed dimmer than death itself, he spotted none other than Elizabeth's figure sitting in a chair at his brother's bedside, her profile haloed in light from the candle held in one hand, a book in the other. It was a sight he'd certainly not anticipated, and he wondered that no one had informed him of her presence in the sickroom. He stood in silence a minute or two as she read aloud:

"And we have come seeking your prince, Healfdane's son, protector of this people, only in friendship. Instruct us, Watchman, help us with your words! Our errand is a great one, our business with the glorious king of the Danes no secret; there's nothing dark or hidden in our coming. You know, if we've heard the truth, and been told honestly, that your country is cursed with some strange, vicious creature that hunts only at night and that no one has seen. It's said, watchman, that he has slaughtered your people, brought terror to the darkness"

"Beowulf?" Richard asked as he entered, prompting Mrs. Darcy to turn from the book and face him.

"Matthew told me it is a favorite of his," answered Elizabeth as she stood. "Though he is not very receptive."

"But appreciative, I'll wager. He's always enjoyed stories about heroes and monsters."

An awkward silence passed between them before Elizabeth said, "I am not sure what to say. Not the happy return you'd hoped for, surely. At the very least you've come just in time, Colonel. I mean, _Captain_."

"Richard," he corrected.

"You are injured?"

"'Tis nothing, really," he replied. "Do they know you are in here?"

She shook her head, and turned back to Stephen's still and sickly form. "He should not be alone."

"I agree," said Richard. "Your husband, however, is likely searching for you as we speak. You had better go down. I'll stay with him."

Elizabeth nodded, and gave Richard's hand a tender squeeze before exiting the room. Richard looked at his brother lying atop the covers, his eyes closed. Lungs grasping at air, Stephen's chest rose up and down, his breath emitting what sounded to Richard's ears like a horse grating a hoof across a pebbly road.

"Stephen," Richard said. "Can you hear me?" In a sharper tone, he ordered, "_Stephen!_"

The viscount's eyes blinked opened; and he turned his head to the sound of Richard's voice. The brothers' eyes locked as Fitzwilliam

took Elizabeth's place at the chair and brought it nearer to the bedside, taking many moments to drink in the horrid sight of him, a sight he'd actually seen many times at the encampments both in Spain and Brighton. But this instance in particular threatened to undo him as a man, not only because it was his own brother who now lay waiting for death to take him, but also of the profound realization of what was to fall into Richard's more than reluctant hands once Stephen took his last, aching breath.

"Brother," Richard said roughly, leaning in to make sure Stephen could hear and understand every word, "I swear before God Almighty that I shall do whatever Father asks of me. I will serve you, work for you, see to the care and well-being of all the properties, the tenants, _anything_—only please, God, please do not bring this title upon me. I do not want this, Stephen—"

Richard brought his knees to the floor and, taking his brother's cold, gray hand, prayed with his head pressed firmly to the mattress.

"Dear Lord, Our Father, I beseech you do not take my brother away. He will be a good earl, I shall see to it—I promise you—" _please!_ Please do not allow it. Stop it from happening. Let him breathe, let him live—"

By this time, Richard was weeping, and did not quite catch his brother attempting to speak to him until he tried again, muttering something unintelligible Richard struggled to decipher. He leaned closer to Stephen's dry, cracked lips.

"What, Brother? What is it?"

Richard kept thinking he was hearing the word "thawed," which made no sense, but then came to realize Stephen was saying a person's name, and began deducing who this person might be.

"Thorn? Thornton?" He guessed. Stephen shook his head weakly, and repeated the name once more, dragging out the last syllable with a sound like he were gargling shards of glass.

"Thornhaaaaauuugh!" He cried out, grabbing the epaulet of Fitzwilliam's coat which signified his rank as Captain.

Thornhaugh.

Richard knew he had heard the name before, but could scarcely recall the context or comprehend why his brother was saying _that_ name among his dying words, and with such vitriol.

"Who is Thornhaugh, Stephen? What of him?"

Stephen began coughing violently, as merely saying the name took too much of the precious little supply of air in his lungs.

"Richard, my boy," said Dr. Fletcher just behind him. "Do not have him speak. He cannot endure it."

"Who is Thornhaugh?" Richard repeated over Stephen's coughing, this time to the doctor, who shook his head in ignorance.

"A friend, perhaps? An enemy? At this point, it matters not."

"He says it for a reason," said Richard.

"He is feverish from the laudanum, Captain," replied Fletcher, "his mind a mad clamber of random thoughts and images, like a waking dream."

"Why can you not make him well?" Richard asked angrily. "Why not him, and why me?"

"We've no way to know," answered the tired, rotund physician. "We tried, my dear boy—day and night. But your brother—he simply is not built as you are."

Richard spat out a curse, and marched out of the room, the name Thornhaugh still resonating in his head.

Chapter 3

Georgiana Darcy awakened early that morning to a hand gently nudging her shoulder. She had not slept well over the last many nights for distressing over the well-being of her family, who appeared to exist in a perpetual fog as a result of Lord Ashbourne's ever-worsening condition. Georgiana and Stephen shared no particular bond. Indeed, she had only ever spent time in the man's presence at large family gatherings, Christmas dinners and the like, and could not recall an instance they had shared a warm moment, or even fond words with one another; for she had always been under Cousin Richard's care whilst Stephen lived, as Richard often described, the more stimulating life of a viscount. She felt guilty for not loving Stephen as she should, and worried more about the effect his death should have on her closer relations than the poor man's actual suffering. Hence, she wept often; and when she did not weep, she played. And when she played, she thought of the Almack's ball and the night she was able to, for the duration of her performance, cast aside her trepidations and show a dubious crowd through music what her family meant to her, and what Elizabeth meant to her brother.

Upon awakening, Georgiana turned over to see her brother sitting at the edge of her bed, donned in his outdoor attire. She knew he was to go to Brighton that day and bring Richard home, which eased her troubled mind, and gave her a measure of relief and gratitude that her best beloved cousin was alive and well, though apparently injured from battle. With God's luck, he would never go off to war again, and stay permanently to bring balance to the family with his grit and good humor as he always had.

"You are leaving now, Brother?" Georgiana asked.

"I must go, yes," he replied. "But first, there is something I must give you."

Georgiana sat up, wondering why her brother appeared so oddly nervous. In his hand, he held a letter—"Cousin Richard's, she had assumed.

"This belongs to you," William said, handing her the letter, her name written plainly on the front.

Georgiana received few letters, and wondered at this one having not gone through the post, but apparently put directly in William's hands to be given to her. "Who is it from?"

"Lord Russell."

"Who?"

"Lord Russell. The gentleman you danced with at the ball."

I danced with many a gentleman that evening, Brother. I scarcely recall most of their names, I am not sorry to say."

"I think you should remember Lord Russell, though he apparently prefers to be called John. Perhapsâ€"

"John!"

Georgiana had certainly not forgotten the especially kind and humorous young man with whom she'd shared a dance at the ball, and would likely never forget their exchange afterwards, which began pleasantly, but ended horribly and with the dark-haired gentlemen storming off in anger. In a moment of panic, she had offended him, and wrongfully so, and would have tried to make amends that same evening but for lack of opportunity; for she had quit the ballroom with William and Lizzy in quite a rush after their predictably incensing and "scandalous" waltz. Had John forgiven her rudeness? What could he possibly wish to hell her? And why had he waited so long?

"Before you open it," William said as though reading her thoughts, "I must explain myself, dearest. You will find the letter is dated the fifteenth of July."

"The day after the ball?"

William nodded. "Since then, I have held it in my possession, deliberating on whether or not to give it to youâ€"not for lack of trust or faith in either of you, dearest, but for separate reasons entirely, reasons I've not time to explain at present, but someday will. I promise."

"So he wrote this immediately after the ball."

"Apparently, yes."

"And gave it to you the next morning?"

"Yes. Very respectfully, I might add, and with the assurance that his only intention was to, as he put it, resolve the misunderstanding between the two of you."

"I see. But you still saw reasons to withhold it, possibly forever."

He sighed heavily. "Yes, dearest. But as I saidâ€"

"I shall give you the benefit of the doubt on this one, Brother. But I should very much like to hear these _reasons_ after you've returned

with our cousin."

"Then I am forgiven?"

"Of course, silly!"

William thanked her for understanding, and kissed her goodbye before setting off. Georgiana could not tear open the red seal fast enough; and for those precious few minutes in the silence and solitude of her bed chamber, all of her troubles dissipated, every ounce of guilt, of grief, all the mounting distress over the last week. The letter read:

Dear Miss Darcy,

Your hasty departure from the ballroom prevented me from personally commending a most breathtaking performance I fear few witnessed with the reverence it deserved...

End
file.